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Editorial

HOW MAY CHRISTIANITY BE DEFENDED TODAY?

Under this title, Professor A. C. McGiffert, in the October number of the *Hibbert Journal*, calls attention to the fact that the older defenses of Christianity do not meet the crying demands of apologetics today. "It is not doubt of the truth of traditional doctrines, but doubt of their value, that is always most ominous." President Faunce touches on another aspect of the present situation when he says in his recently published Lyman Beecher Lectures, "It is not that we disbelieve what he (the traditionalist) says; but his whole way of approaching truth, of testing truth, of valuing truth is so different from ours, that we simply cannot follow him. He defends the truths that we have believed all our lives in such a way as to shake our faith in them. He places the duties we have been performing for years on a basis which for us does not exist." Preachers, theologians, and apologists have for some time been more or less keenly aware that Christianity is not being taken by men as seriously as it should be. The ever-increasing output of literature dealing with "new" methods, "new" theology, "modern" statements of faith, and the like, indicates a deep desire to remedy the situation. How can we convince the modern world that it needs Christianity?

THE MORAL DISTRUST OF CHRISTIANITY

The apologetics of the past have been largely concerned with the intellectual difficulties in the way of accepting Christian doctrine. Especially in the past century, when science has made such strides, superseding many traditional religious beliefs concerning the origin and history of the world and of man, it has seemed to be of prime importance to harmonize the results of science with the doctrines of revealed religion. However helpful these attempts may have been

to troubled souls within the church, the outcome of the "warfare between religion and science" has not been wholly to the advantage of Christianity. The theologians have been gradually forced to retreat, covering their withdrawal with rhetorical and exegetical statements which have not always seemed candid to the scientist. The first chapters of Genesis have been tortured into yielding the supposed "latest" conclusions of science, only to find that science moves on, making necessary another "harmonization." Gradually the suspicion arises that the theologian is less interested in discovering the truth than in saving his ecclesiastical reputation. Out of this has grown a moral distrust of theology on the part of scientists.

But an equally significant moral distrust has arisen from the development of our poignant social problems today. Professor Tufts, in his recent *Ethics*, remarks, "While savages have often practiced infanticide for economic reasons, it is doubtful if any savage family ever equaled the refined selfishness and cruelty of the child labor which modern families have furnished and modern society has permitted." In an age which boasts of its Christian civilization, we find such appalling wretchedness and want due to social injustice, that the church is discredited by those who suffer from an industrial system which has grown up with no effective protest on the part of the church. Indeed, Christianity has frequently seemed to be on the side of the very "vested rights," which take their toll of human lives. Thus in addition to the prejudice of scientists we have the alienation of the workingmen to be overcome by the apologist. The scientist has come to feel that Christianity has not supported him in his search for truth. The workingman has come to feel that Christianity has left him in the lurch in his warfare for social justice. It is this moral distrust of the church which is its chief menace today. How shall we meet this new situation?

THE FUTILITY OF A FORMAL DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANITY

For centuries, Christianity has rested its case on the divine sanction for its existence. The authority of revelation has been cited to guarantee the truth of the Christian system as a whole. The apologete had only to vindicate the authority of the church or of the Bible, and his main work was done. The real citadel of Christianity rested

safe behind these outer ramparts. But today these outer defenses no longer keep out the enemy. The scientist pays absolutely no heed to what the Bible says in the realm of science. The doctrine of evolution has come to be almost universally accepted in spite of its incongruence with the first chapters of Genesis. And in social life, the exigencies of industrial life have proved stronger than the precepts of revelation. Sunday labor has become very general in spite of sabbatarians. Business has often evolved its methods and ideals as if the Golden Rule did not exist. Social settlements feel that they must dissolve any alliance with formal Christianity in order to avoid the taint of professionalism in their work. And when special privileges are defended by appeal to the formal authority of political and economic tradition, the method of authority in religion is naturally discredited by those who wish to discuss real issues rather than formal claims. To commend Christianity to such men as a divinely ordained system is evidently impossible.

IS THE CHRISTIAN IDEAL MORALLY DEFENSIBLE ?

The apologist, therefore, must abandon any attempt to save the situation by a formal defense of a "system" of doctrine. The attack is closer home than that. The enemy is not thinking of the outer fortifications, but is asking whether the citadel can hold its own. Justice the modern social consciousness is determined to have. The exploitation of man for the sake of greed must cease. Does Christianity stand fundamentally for righteousness of this practical sort? If its main purpose is to save "souls" for another life rather than to do justice to men, women, and children in this life, if it is interested in the heavenly millennium rather than in a better social order on earth, then the workingman will turn to the social agitator rather than to the Christian teacher. Probably not many men would go so far as Morrison I. Swift, when he exclaims: "Man will not give religion two thousand centuries or twenty centuries more to try itself and waste human time. Its time is up: its probation is ended; its own record ends it." Yet no thoughtful observer can deny that the challenge implied in this judgment is one which Christianity must speedily meet.

Professor McGiffert regards this as the real problem of apologetics.

He takes his stand on the ideal of social righteousness. He believes that "Christianity stands primarily for the promotion of the Kingdom of God in this earth—that is, the reign of sympathy and service among men." The task of the apologete is to make people believe this. The ideal of social justice and service needs no defence. The great question is whether this ideal can be best promoted by discarding Christianity or by asking Christianity to undertake the programme of social regeneration.

THE SERVICE OF CRITICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN THIS APOLOGETIC

But what is Christianity? How shall we discover whether or not it is capable of espousing and carrying to completion the social ideal of today? Does the church today in its seeming moral defects represent the real religion of Jesus? It is fortunate that in attempting to answer this question we have the methods and achievements of biblical scholarship at our disposal. The outcome of this scholarship has been to bring into clearest emphasis the essentially moral element in the Bible. The prophets of Israel have ceased to be shadowy figures, and have become living preachers of social justice. Jesus is discovered to be less concerned about the constitution of the church than about those very human virtues which are essential to the cure of our present social ills. The history of the church discloses a significant power of moral reform from within, whenever it has become evident that there has been a departure from the moral ideals of Jesus. Whatever may be the shortcomings of the church in any age, there can be no doubt that Christianity is essentially committed to the very ideal of righteousness and social justice that is controlling in the thought of today. To make this clear is the imperative duty of the hour. If it shall lead to less insistence on rituals and forms in our churches, it may at the same time be the means of centering attention on the real heart of the gospel.

CAN SOCIAL PROGRESS DISPENSE WITH RELIGION?

Now, the power of the moral message of the Bible is due to the fact that the prophets were able to utter their ideals with the conviction that they were expressing the will of God. The early Christians could endure scorn and persecution because they believed that God was leading them. Suppose some prophet should arise today,

who could convince the laboring men that in fighting for industrial and social justice they were fighting the battles of the Lord of this universe. Can anyone guess the power which would come to the movement through such an alliance of the social movement with religion? Now, Christianity stands for the religious basis of morality. If the moral issue could be so defined that it should be between materialists on the one hand and between believers in the righteous God on the other, can there be any doubt where the victory would lie? Christianity is distrusted because comfort-loving believers are often less zealous for social righteousness than are confessed unbelievers. To reinstate in our Christian life something of the religious fervor of the prophets in social issues and to stimulate in our churches the love for men which Jesus showed would convince men that Christianity has power which nowhere else exists to bring about the kingdom of sympathy and service in humanity. Fortunately there is abundant evidence that many thoughtful Christian leaders appreciate the importance of this apologetic problem of our day. And if the church should be unable to win the victory in this conflict it would be because it allowed some other organization to become the bearer of the moral message of the Bible. Let the church then cease all futile tinkering of formal defenses and endeavor to understand the spiritual treasure which has been committed to it; let it squarely meet the real issue without asking special privilege; let it bring its religious reinforcement to the splendid moral ideals of social reforms; and its moral vindication will appear in the only way in which such vindication is possible—in actual achievement which will win the gratitude and trust of men.